DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 295 186 CS 211 280

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TITLE A New Accreditation Problem: Defining the Liberal Arts and Sciences.
PUB DATE Jul 88
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (71st, Portland, OR, July 2-5, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Historical Materials (060)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Accreditation (Institutions); Administrator Attitudes; Course Selection (Students); *Curriculum Design; Definitions; *Degree Requirements; Educational Strategies; Elective Courses; General Education; Higher Education; *Journalism Education; *Liberal Arts
IDENTIFIERS *Accrediting Council Educ Journalism Mass Commun; Curriculum Balance; Curriculum Emphases; *Journalism Schools; Liberal Arts Colleges

ABSTRACT

In 1985, the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) adopted a standard requiring that journalism/mass communications students take a minimum of 90 semester hours in courses outside their major, with at least 65 hours in liberal arts and sciences. The term "liberal arts" defies precise definition, even though these minimum requirements would account for half or more of students' total academic program. Philosophers and educators have questioned the idea of liberal arts education for thousands of years, with no definitive answers. With the 90/65 rule, programs are being asked to provide a definition. Responses to a questionnaire sent to 87 ACEJMC-accredited schools show how programs are coping with the 90/65 standard. A few programs reported revising graduation checkout procedures and student advisement practices in response to the rule. In addition, the questionnaire revealed that identifying liberal arts courses is a complex, highly subjective undertaking. Most programs reported having no procedure for identifying liberal arts courses, or merely assumed that courses taught in their colleges of arts and sciences qualified. Some programs, such as the program at Western Kentucky University, have established committees to work on this problem. Ultimately, however, answers to these questions will not yield complete agreement, and ACEJMC must approach the judgment of individual programs with an attitude of trust. (Thirteen footnotes are appended.) (MM)

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A New Accreditation Problem: Defining the Liberal Arts and Sciences

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ABSTRACT

In reference to a standard of the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) requiring students to take "65 semester hours in the liberal arts and sciences", this paper suggests that the term "liberal arts" defies precise definition. The paper provides a brief overview of the development of the liberal arts idea and reviews definitons of the term.

Additionally, it reports a survey to determine how accredited programs decide which courses qualify as "liberal arts" and to assess effects of the Council standard.

Most programs reported having no procedure for identifying liberal arts and science courses or just assuming that courses taught in their colleges of arts and sciences qualified. Some were beginning to establish formal systems of course evaluation.

Two-fifths of the programs reported revising graduation checkout procedures since the 65-hour rule was adopted. One-fifth reported revising student advisement practices.

Presented to

The ASJMC Administrators' Paper Session
AEJMC Annual Convention July 3, 1988 Portland, Oregon

CS211280

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DEFINING THE LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES

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A NEW ACCREDITATION PROBLEM:
DEFINING THE LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES

By Robert L. Hoskins

"That there is a certain sort of education," Aristotle said in about 340 BC, "in which children are to be educated, not as being useful or necessary but as being liberal and noble, is evident."

"As to whether (there is) one or several sorts," he continued, "which (they) are and how (they should be taught), we must speak of these things later."(1)

And we are still speaking of them today.

In 1985, the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) adopted a standard requiring "that students take a minimum of 90 semester hours in courses outside the major area of journalism and mass communications, **with no fewer than 65 semester hours in the basic liberal arts and sciences.**"(2)

I like that rule. I believe it is an improvement on the old 25/75 standard. Certainly, ACEJMC-bashing is not a purpose of this paper.

I do believe, though, that the new rule presents us with this question: What are "the basic liberal arts and sciences"?

That is a question I do not recall ever having heard debated seriously.

I have heard discussion about how many liberal arts hours should be required. I have heard a few journalists declare that a strong liberal education is the best possible program for a reporter or editor--an attitude, by the way, that Aristotle would have said was totally illiberal. I have heard, as you have, horror stories about schools counting Sailing or Hiking as liberal arts, an assessment with which Aristotle probably would have agreed.

Yet, those few times that I have raised the issue in the company of colleagues, I have come away with the impression that I am the only one with the question; that everyone else either already has the answer or does not consider it worth pursuing.

Surely, my impressions are inaccurate. With those 65 liberal arts and sciences hours accounting for half or more of our students' total academic

program, and with ACEJMC requiring that the transcripts of at least 95 percent of each graduating class show those 65 hours, surely I am not the only one with the question (it turned out that I am not) and surely it is a question worthy of review.

In fact, "liberal arts" and "liberal education" are terms that defy precise definition.

One of the first to outline what modern scholars have called a liberal arts curriculum was Plato, who said his philosopher-kings should first study music and gymnastics, then arithmetic, geometry and astronomy and, finally, "dialectic", or logic. (3)

Aristotle refined his teacher's ideas and in turn taught that the liberal arts--those courses of study that should be pursued by free men--were letters (reading), gymnastics, music and drawing (writing), though he was more concerned about the student's motive than the activity. Education undertaken for such "vulgar" reasons as earning a living could not, he said, be liberal.(4)

As the Romans took on all things Greek, they suggested adding medicine and architecture to the lists of Plato and Aristotle. Their ideas were not widely accepted.

Then, in the Fifth Century, drawing on the teachings of Plato and Aristotle, various Roman scholars outlined seven areas of study required of the educated man. Because of a Biblical reference to the Seven Pillars of the Temple of Wisdom, this outline quickly found Church support and was spread over the Empire. As described by the Romans, the liberal arts consisted of the Trivium--Grammar, Rhetoric and Logic, and the Quadrivium--Music, Arithmetic, Geometry and Astronomy. That curriculum changed little in the next 800 years. (5)

In the Twelfth Century, new works by Aristotle were rediscovered and his three "philosophies"--Natural, Moral and Mental--were added to the Arts. Still, for another 300 or 400 years, a liberal education consisted in practice of a course on the works of Aristotle, in Latin translation.

Gradually, those elements of education thought necessary for the successful pursuit of leisure--or for service to the Church--were recognized as valuable assets in the workplace, too. Rhetoric, for example, the skill of oral argument so important to the free men of Athens, evolved into the art of composing letters and constructing documents such as wills, contracts and decrees. Eventually it was merged into the study of Roman law.

Similarly, over time, other specialized kinds of education became necessary for the practice of a variety of clerical, commercial, professional and scientific occupations.

Complaining, then, that the liberal arts had become too practical, and that the current curriculum was unsuited for either a gentleman or a scholar, Italian and English humanists of the 1500s swept away major portions of the medieval program and replaced them with what has been called "the polite learning", the Greek classics in the original Greek, rather than Latin translation, Hebrew, Logic, Rhetoric, Mathematics (as applied to fortification and ballistics), Horsemanship, Navigation, Music, Dancing and Heraldry.(6)

By the 1700s, buffeted on one side by the rise of the natural sciences and on the other by the blossoming of such social sciences as history, anthropology, political economy and sociology, the orthodox and traditional identification of the liberal arts was relatively meaningless. The new disciplines seemed to concern themselves with humanity even more directly than did the classic literatures.

By the 1800s, many argued that a liberal education was a useless education. Edinburgh-based disciples of John Locke were especially critical of Oxford University's continued emphasis on the classics. They subscribed fully to their master's argument that "children's time should be spent in acquiring what might be useful to them, when they come to be men, rather than that their heads should be stuffed with a deal of trash, a great part whereof they usually never do. . . think on again as long as they live." (7)

In 1852, in a series of lectures prepared to celebrate the founding of the Catholic University of Ireland, John Henry Cardinal Newman delivered an eloquent defense of liberal education. Deploring the Edinburgh emphasis on education for the professions and scientific advancement, he wrote:

"It is common to speak of 'liberal knowledge', of the 'liberal arts and studies', and of a 'liberal education', . . . what is really meant by the word? . . . First, in its grammatical sense it is opposed to servile. . . bodily labor, mechanical employment, and the like. .. As far as this contrast may be considered as a guide into the meaning of the word, liberal education and liberal pursuits are exercises of mind, of reason, of reflection." (8)

Significantly, and perhaps of special interest to ACEJMC, Newman did not try to list individual courses that would fit his definition.

In America, it seems to have been accepted practice that a higher education should be both liberal and useful. It was "liberal" in that young men were taught the culture of Western civilization, but "vocational" in that it prepared them not for leisure but for careers as lawyers, teachers, doctors and clergymen. The purpose of Harvard, for example, was liberal to the extent that its first prospectus spoke of advancing learning and perpetuating it to posterity, but vocational in that it foresaw the need to educate up a new class of ministers, "when our present ministers shall lie in the dust." (9)

Cardinal Newman would have argued that Harvard's program could not be liberal if one of its purposes was vocational. Thus, in America, a new definition of "liberal arts" evolved.

John Dewey considered the issue in 1926 and wrote, "practically all attempt to define liberal education by some principle of content has been given up, though it is still generally felt that Greek, Latin and mathematics, at least from algebra through calculus, are particularly liberal in character. . . A liberal education is one that liberalizes. Theoretically, any type of education may do this. As a matter of fact, all of them fall much short of accomplishing it, some in one respect and some in another."(10)

In 1945, "liberal education" was defined as "a broad, academic education, as opposed to a strictly vocational education." That particular dictionary entry added this clarification: "In preparation for certain professions, as, for example, that of professor of English (or, it could have said "journalist"), a liberal education may be regarded, strictly speaking, as a form of vocational education."(11)

Harvard University's Committee on the Objectives of a General Education in a Free Society reported in 1946 that "liberal education" could "best be expressed as . . . an education directed toward developing not specific skills and abilities but the general capacities distinctive of the use of reason." (12)

Today, far removed from Aristotle's four specific liberal arts or the Trivium and Quadrivium of the Middle Ages, the American Educators' Encyclopedia defines "liberal education" as "education that is broad and general as opposed to being specialized or preparing one for a vocation or profession."(13)

(Just as an aside, we might ask, in today's specialized faculties, where is that non-specialized course? And among our super-career-conscious students, where is one who is not preparing for a vocation or profession?)

I have provided this very brief historical overview of the idea of the liberal arts and liberal education to suggest that the questions we ask today--What is a liberal art?; What is a liberal education?--are hundreds, in fact, thousands, of years old. So these are not questions just cooked up to bedevil the Accrediting Council.

Neither, I submit our glance at history suggests, are they questions to be answered quite so glibly as, "Well, liberal arts are whatever is taught in our college of arts and sciences." How can we allow the organization of our universities--structured with the same careful logic as the post-colonial map of Africa--to define such an abstract idea?

Amazingly, that was the attitude expressed by at least 29 of our accredited programs.

To assess how programs were coping with the new 90/65 standard, I sent a brief questionnaire to 87 ACEJMC-accredited schools. I received returns from 61 (70%).

I listed seven statements describing possible responses to the need--under the 90/65 rule--to more precisely identify those courses qualifying as liberal arts and sciences. Respondents were permitted to check more than one statement.

Administrators at 15 (25%) programs indicated they had no procedure for determining whether a course is acceptable as a liberal arts and science course.

Twenty-nine (48%) indicated that they assume any course taught in their liberal arts and sciences unit is acceptable.

Five (8%) refer questionable courses to the Accrediting Council.

Two (3%) have asked groups or faculties <u>outside</u> their units to advise them as to which courses are liberal arts and sciences.

Twelve (20%) have formed groups or committees <u>within</u> their units to identify acceptable courses.

At 18 (30%) of the responding programs, the unit head is final arbiter.

And at two (3%) programs, such questions are passed on to a university official <u>outside</u> the unit--the provost or registrar, for example.

Because respondents could check multiple items, it should be noted that 11 of the 15 administrators who reported "no procedure" also indicated that they assumed that any course taught in the arts and sciences unit was acceptable. Others who checked "no procedure" also may have meant "no procedure" beyond such an assumption.

Also, to be fair, it should be noted that five of the administrators who assume that courses taught in arts and sciences are acceptable also refer questionable courses to ACEJMC.

Regardless of how they are handling the question now, if program heads had to determine whether certain courses were liberal arts and sciences, what would they want to do or know? They were asked to rank six possibilities.

On a scale of 1 (most important) to 6, seeing the course description ranked first (2.65); reviewing the course syllabus ranked second (2.76), and knowing the department or college in which the course is taught ranked third (2.85).

Of less importance to administrators were knowing whether a course fulfills general education requirements (3.25), talking with an instructor of the course (3.97) and reviewing the textbook used (4.53).

In the past, when I have raised this general issue, the second most frequent response to my question about how we identify liberal arts and sciences courses--after, "Arts and sciences are what is taught in our college of arts and sciences,"--has been something like, "No problem here. We all know what the liberal arts are."

To test that attitude, I included the title and description of 10 courses in my survey and asked respondents to indicate whether each was a liberal arts and science course, a journalism and mass communications course, neither or one about which the respondent had no opinion.

Following are the courses and the percentages classifying them as arts and sciences:

Dance History (in a college of fine arts)--89%

Fundamentals of Music Theory (a music course in a college of liberal arts) --74%

Police-Community Relations (a law enforcement course in a department of sociology in a college of arts and sciences)--72%

Reference and Bibliography (a library science course in a college of education)--48%

National Agriculture Policy (an economics course)--43%

Remote Sensing (a science course in a college of arts and sciences)--33%.

Forecasting (a meteorology course)--30%

Introduction to Physical Activity (a physical education course in a college of education)--25%

Commercial Banking (a finance course)--21%

Telecommunications Law and Regulation (a communications course in a college of arts and sciences)--10%

I am aware of the other curriculum question bubbling through the accreditation process just now. How do you deal with communications-type courses taught outside the journalism and mass communications unit? That question was not a point of this survey, although we may note the problem by the fact that some respondents classified the Telecommunications Law and Regulation course as liberal arts.

Also, I would not suggest that this little classification exercise was in the least definitive. I offer it only to illustrate a lack of agreement among the very individuals charged with monitoring the 90/65 rule.

However, regardless of how we may disagree about the identification of courses or even the rule itself, what has been the result of 90/65?

This survey looked at four possibilities:

Has the rule resulted in a change in the number of liberal arts and science courses our students take?

Has it resulted in a change in the number of journalism and mass communications hours they take?

Have we revised student advisement procedures because of the rule?

Have we revised our graduation checkout procedures?

Eight (13%) of the administrators reporting believed the rule has resulted in their students taking more arts and science hours. Ten (16%) believed it has resulted in their students taking fewer journalism and mass communications hours.

Twelve (20%) administrators reported revising student advisement procedures because of the new rule and 24 (40%) reported revising graduation checkout procedures, although, as one respondent noted, graduation checkout is a little late to deal with a problem.

From even this simple survey, I believe we can develop at least two concluding opinions.

First, it does appear that the 90/65 rule already has had the effects--most would say positive effects--of causing some of us to shift more liberal arts and science hours and fewer journalism and mass communications hours to our students and to give student advisement and, especially, graduation checkout greater attention.

Because 90/65 is not an "approximately" rule--as the old standard of "approximately 25/75"--administrators evidently recognize that there is little room for error. Thus, they have been preparing new advisement checksheets, requiring students to meet more frequently with advisers, even holding in-service advisement workshops for faculty. Such activities may be time-consuming, and some administrators may be grumbling about them, but I suggest they are benefiting our programs and our students.

Second, however, even a cursory review of education history and even the very basic survey reported here reveal that defining or identifying liberal arts courses is a complex, highly subjective undertaking. Liberal courses, the liberal arts, come in a variety of shapes and sizes. They wear strange disguises sometimes. They hide away in unusual departments. Sometimes, even the most grizzled old liberal arts hunters will disagree on whether they have trapped the real thing or an impostor.

Thus, it seems to me, we devalue the very worthy ideal of a liberal education when we accept some simplistic definition of the liberal arts:

"Liberal arts and sciences are whatever is taught in our college of arts and sciences."

"Liberal arts and sciences are whatever the Accrediting Council says they are."

"Liberal arts and sciences are whatever our university approves for the general education core."

Surely, in the interest of a fair and equitable accreditation process, in the interest of the integrity of our total journalism and mass communications curriculum, and in the interest of our own reputations as educators, we must develop better answers.

Happily, we can report that some programs already are working in that direction.

As noted earlier, 12 programs have established committees to work with the problem. Two other programs are working with groups outside their units. They are reviewing questionable courses, soliciting opinions from colleagues throughout their universities and, in some cases, carefully establishing lists of approved courses.

I would call special attention to Western Kentucky University. Under the leadership of JoAnn Albers, the WKU faculty has developed a comprehensive list of courses it believes meet the liberal arts and science requirement. And they are not all in the college of arts and sciences, either. Even agriculture is represented.

Other programs involved in similar processes include Cal State—Long Beach, Missouri, Oklahoma State and Oregon. The attitude relative to the 90/65 rule as reflected in the work at these universities was represented, I believe, by one of our colleagues who wrote: "I think we must trust universities to classify their courses."

Trust. That, it seems to me, must be the final word on the liberal arts and sciences question.

Most of our programs can benefit from more careful attention to the liberal arts and sciences component. But I doubt that any intellectually defensible approach to this issue will yield complete agreement. Rather, when we have examined questionable courses; when we have made a rational and consistent effort to categorize the strays and the mavericks, I do not believe it is unreasonable to expect ACEJMC to approach our judgment with an attitude of trust.

Any other attitude is, to quote another colleague, "arbitrary and intellectually obsolete." Or, as the oracle of Chapel Hill has announced, "It's a can of worms that shouldn't be opened."

----FOOTNOTES----

1. Aristotle, The Politics, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 232.

2. Accredited Journalism and Mass Communications Education, 1987-88 (Accrediting Council in Journalism and Mass Communications, 1987). p. 9.

3. Plato, The Republic, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Book, Inc., 1968), pp. 201-216.

4. Aristotle, The Politics, p. 230.

5. A Cyclopedia of Education (1926), s.v. "Liberal Education," by John Dewey.

6. Morison, Samuel Eliot, The Founding of Harvard College (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1935), p. 55.

7. Newman, John Henry, The Idea of a University, ed. Martin Svalic (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 120.

8. Newman, The Idea of a University, p. 80.

9. Morison, The Founding of Harvard College, p. 432.

10. A Cyclopedia of Education, s.v. "Liberal Education."

11. Good, Carter, ed., Dictionary of Education (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1945), p. 240.

12. The Encyclopedia of Education (1971), s.v. "Liberal Education," by Paul Hirst.

13. American Educators' Encyclopedia (1982), s.v. "Liberal Education," by Edward L. Dejnozka and David E. Kapel.